

# The Kink in the Human Brain

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Pointless, joyless consumption is destroying our world of wonders.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2014

This is a moment at which anyone with the capacity for reflection should stop and wonder what we are doing.

If the news that in the past 40 years the world has **lost over 50% its vertebrate wildlife** (mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish) fails to tell us that there is something wrong with the way we live, it's hard to imagine what could. Who believes that a social and economic system which has this effect is a healthy one? Who, contemplating this loss, could call it progress?

In fairness to the modern era, this is an extension of a trend that has lasted some two million years. The loss of much of the African megafauna – sabretooths and false sabretooths, giant hyaenas and amphicyonids (bear dogs), several species of elephant – **coincided with the switch towards meat eating** by hominids (ancestral humans). It's hard to see what else could have been responsible for the peculiar pattern of extinction then.

As we spread into other continents, their megafaunas almost immediately collapsed. Perhaps the most reliable way of dating the first arrival of people anywhere is the sudden loss of large animals. The habitats we see as pristine – the Amazon rainforest or coral reefs for example – are in fact almost empty: they have lost most of the great beasts that used to inhabit them, which drove crucial natural processes.

Since then we have worked our way down the foodchain, rubbing out smaller predators, medium-sized herbivores, and now, through both habitat destruction and hunting, wildlife across all classes and positions in the foodweb. There seems to be some kink in the human brain that prevents us from stopping, that drives us to carry on taking and competing and destroying, even when there is no need to do so.

But what we see now is something new: a speed of destruction that exceeds even that of the first settlement of the Americas, 14,000 years ago, when an entire hemisphere's ecology was transformed through a firestorm of extinction within a few dozen generations, in which the majority of large vertebrate species disappeared.

Many people blame this process on human population growth, and there's no doubt that it has been a factor. But two other trends have developed even faster and further. The first is the rise in consumption; the second is amplification by technology. Every year, new pesticides, new fishing technologies, new mining methods, new techniques for processing trees are developed. We are waging an increasingly asymmetric war against the living world.

But why are we at war? In the rich nations, which commission much of this destruction through imports, most of our consumption has nothing to do with meeting human needs.

This is what hits me harder than anything: the disproportion between what we lose and what we gain. Economic growth in a country whose primary and secondary needs have already been met means developing ever more useless stuff to meet ever fainter desires.

For example, a vague desire to amuse friends and colleagues (especially through the Secret Santa nonsense) commissions the consumption of thousands of tonnes of metal and plastic, often confectioned into complex electronic novelties: toys for adults. They might provoke a snigger or two, then they are dumped in a cupboard. After a few weeks, scarcely used, **they find their way into landfill**.

In a society bombarded by advertising and driven by the growth imperative, pleasure is reduced to hedonism and hedonism is reduced to consumption. We use consumption as a cure for boredom, to fill the void that an affectless, grasping, atomised culture creates, to brighten the grey world we have created.

We care ever less for the possessions we buy, and dispose of them ever more quickly. Yet the extraction of the raw materials required to produce them, the pollution commissioned in their manufacturing, the infrastructure and noise and burning of fuel needed to transport them are trashing a natural world infinitely more fascinating and intricate than the stuff we produce. The loss of wildlife is a loss of wonder and enchantment, of the magic with which the living world infects our lives.

Perhaps it is misleading to suggest that “we” are doing all this. It's being done not only by us but to us. One of the remarkable characteristics of recent growth in the rich world is how few people benefit. Almost all the gains go to a tiny number of people: one study suggests that the richest 1% in the United States **capture 93% of the increase in incomes** that growth delivers. Even with growth

rates of 2 or 3% or more, working conditions for most people continue to deteriorate, as we find ourselves on short contracts, without full employment rights, without the security or the choice or the pensions our parents enjoyed.

Working hours rise, wages stagnate or fall, tasks become duller, more stressful and harder to fulfill, emails and texts and endless demands clatter inside our heads, shutting down the ability to think, corners are cut, conditions deteriorate, housing becomes almost impossible to afford, there's ever less money for essential public services. What and whom is this growth for?

It's for the people who run or own the banks, the hedge funds, the mining companies, the advertising firms, the lobbying companies, the weapons manufacturers, the buy-to-let portfolios, the office blocks, the country estates, the offshore accounts. The rest of us are induced to regard it as necessary and desirable through a system of marketing and framing so intensive and all-pervasive that it amounts to brainwashing.

A system that makes us less happy, less secure, that narrows and impoverishes our lives, is presented as the only possible answer to our problems. There is no alternative – we must keep marching over the cliff. Anyone who challenges it is either ignored or excoriated.

And the beneficiaries? Well they are also the biggest consumers, using their spectacular wealth to exert impacts thousands of times greater than most people achieve. Much of the natural world is destroyed so that the very rich can fit their yachts with mahogany, eat bluefin tuna sushi, scatter ground rhino horn over their food, land their private jets on airfields carved from rare grasslands, burn in one day as much fossil fuel as the average global citizen uses in a year.

Thus the Great Global Polishing proceeds, wearing down the knap of the Earth, rubbing out all that is distinctive and peculiar, in human culture as well as nature, reducing us to replaceable automata within a homogenous global workforce, inexorably transforming the riches of the natural world into a featureless monoculture.

Is this not the point at which we shout stop? At which we use the extraordinary learning and expertise we have developed to change the way we organise ourselves, to contest and reverse the trends that have governed our relationship with the living planet for the past two million years, and that are now destroying its remaining features at astonishing speed? Is this not the point at which we challenge the inevitability of endless growth on a finite planet? If not now, when?

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